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AUTHOR Franke, David
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ABSTRACT

A newly-hired faculty member at the State University of New York at Cortland began a Faculty Writing Group that met every other week to discuss their writing projects and progress. What he expected was that the members would sustain themselves as writers via the newly established Faculty Writing Group. What he did not expect was that the Faculty Writing Group would contribute to the cultural conversation about writing at Cortland, disturbing some habits and resonating with others. At its best the Faculty Writing Group, though not formally allied with the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program, has raised the conversation about writing in a new way, as a collaborative and developmental process that the entire community shares in. (RS)

Completing the Circle: Faculty as Writers.

by David Franke

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David Franke, Ph.D.
State University of New York, Cortland
English Department
112 Old Main
Box 2000
Cortland, NY 13045
<http://dinosaur.cortland.edu>
dtfranke@cortland.edu

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Abstract:

What I expected was that we would sustain ourselves as writers via the newly established Faculty Writing Group. What I didn't expect was that the Faculty Writing Group would contribute to the cultural conversation about writing at Cortland, disturbing some habits and resonating with others. At its best the Faculty Writing Group, though not formally allied with the WAC program, has raised the conversation about writing in a new way, as a collaborative and developmental process that we as entire community share in.

Hi. My name is David Franke, and my paper today is "Completing the Circle: Faculty as Writers." It presents a "scene of writing" in a particular academic site; I give some context for the school and what writing means there. My assumption in what I'm about to talk about is that writing is a localized phenomenon, a behavior that defines and is defined by the community that sponsors it. What I'm trying to say here is that your mileage may vary. I then turn to the ways that establishing a Faculty Writing Group resonates with the traditions at my school, and end with some nuts and bolts description of how the writing group.

I work at State University of New York, at Cortland, a smallish undergraduate college of 8000 students in rural New York We grow corn there, and pumpkins and apples—we're not in NYC. Our students at SUNY Cortland are often first-generation college students, and very often they come to college with the intent to become teachers or coaches. If you send your kids to school in NY

state, it's likely that they will be schooled by a SUNY Cortland graduate. Still, I remember arriving at Cortland, hired to my first tenure track job after fifteen years as an adjunct and grad student, to hear the provost say in a big hall that our students are often deeply ambivalent about the value of academic work and the value of their teachers as authorities. One of my new colleagues, also entering that fall, raised his hand and asked the obvious question: if so many students are here to become teachers and coaches, why in heaven's name would they be ambivalent about teachers and what teachers do? I don't remember the reply—there is probably a complicated answer that involves many of the factors I've already mentioned. But this ambivalence is certainly part of the culture. Any academic work at Cortland appears in that context, an ambivalence about what academics do. Writing and research, especially, are touchy issues at Cortland. Writing is often understood as a matter of correctness; the longstanding course "Grammar for Teachers" was given to me in my first semester. Because our history is as a normal school—a teaching college—teaching is valued at Cortland; unlike most colleges where publishing the primary value, teaching has traditionally been our stock in trade, our area of expertise. People know one another; they hold doors for you when you are carrying packages. Our responsibilities are understood to be to the students, to the departments we work in and to the college. We do *not* see ourselves as beholdng to our conservative governor George Pataki.

Neither are our disciplines particularly visible on campus. Contributing to one's discipline, especially in the form of writing and publishing, has long been accepted, but not, until recently, required for tenure. I say "until recently," because that is changing at SUNY Cortland, as it is in many places with an influx of new faculty. Nowadays, 46% of our faculty are new in the last three years; easily over fifty percent are untenured. What writing means to these people and to the University is changing.

The best argument for WAC at this college has been used very effectively; it helps students become critical thinkers and become more literate. Now, although our director is thoughtful about what the terms "critical thinking" and "literacy" might mean in the context of different disciplines, I'm not sure the faculty are as receptive. In fact, raising issues about writing is really difficult. The College Writing Committee, which oversees writing on our campus,

recently wrote up and sent out a survey about WI classes—not to have faculty answer the questions, but merely to have them give us feedback about the utility and accuracy of the questions. We were astonished at the vituperation of some few of the responses. A few replies called this survey an assault on their academic freedom, an attempt to undermine the professor's authority and the like. You can see why our Governor doesn't get far with us. In the end, we ditched the survey. We put our energies into other things. But it brought home to me how very difficult at SUNY Cortland—and probably elsewhere—to sponsor a discussion of writing without it becoming a contest of wills. I was surprised to see how closely parallel students and faculty ran at Cortland. The default setting is that writing is something one group assigns to another. It's not something you do for yourself. Writing is either an act of aggression, a kind of testing, or "mere expression." It's something teachers do to students, and teachers asking teachers about writing is sort of aggressive, like correcting their grammar in speech. In this context, any attempt to raise the conversation about writing is itself seen as raising a red flag. Writing is a complicated and vexed term at my school.

The first year at Cortland was a blur. I found my self overwhelmed by the teaching, committees, and paperwork. All the stories of the first year in an academic job were true for me. Reflecting on the experience with the survey, I realized slowly that it was very easy to overlook faculty as writers. Writing wasn't a shared cultural value at Cortland. And I certainly wasn't getting any writing done. Straight out of graduate school, I felt connected to my discipline, and I felt it slipping away, the people and ideas I valued, as copies of *CCC* and *College English* and *Composition Studies* piled up in my office, unread, my own writing stagnant and my dissertation gathering dust. My response was to propose to other new faculty that we begin what is now known as the Faculty Writing Group, and meet every other week to discuss our writing projects and progress.

What I expected was that we would sustain ourselves as writers. What I didn't expect was that the Faculty Writing Group would contribute to the cultural conversation about writing at Cortland, disturbing some habits and resonating with others. At its best the Faculty Writing Group, though not formally allied with the WAC program, has raised the conversation about writing in a new

way, as a collaborative and developmental process that we as entire community share in.

Through presentations on campus, by deluging our e-mail system with news about the Faculty Writing Group, by establishing a web site for our group, and by meeting with people, by word of mouth, the Faculty Writing Group has become an established entity, a place where *faculty* go to talk about *their* writing. We don't read our own work there, but rather talk about plans and progress. We have had department chairs, advanced undergraduate students, adjuncts, ABDs, botanists, historians, economists, grant writers, library staff, professors emeriti, and others appear at our meetings, and what has been perhaps most remarkable is the ease with which the conversations shuck ego and posturing. We're able to talk pretty straightforwardly about writing and revision. There is no trick to this other than asking two very simple and straightforward questions: What have you been working on completing, and what will you be working on in the next two weeks? These are the bookmarks that I use to direct our conversations.

So what does a meeting of the faculty writing group look like? At our last meeting, Randi comes late to the meeting carrying her new baby, whom we have not seen before, and the Faculty Writing Group stops in its tracks. She downplays the fanfare, but gives us each a glance at the baby, who sleeps in her carrier on the table. While the baby sleeps, we turn back to Ron, who was talking about how he's been trying to prepare for his oral exam in Rhetoric at SUNY Binghamton. It's mid-morning in the summertime; there are seven of us around the seminar table, several regulars and two newcomers, and Arawuna picks up on Ron's concerns about how to prepare, about how to take a stand on all the material that he has spilling out of his notebooks. Arawuna tells him about how she annotated texts before her exams, and about how she wrote out some of the key arguments and her take on the conflicts between the heavy hitters. She's talking once again about how to use writing to prepare for another academic task. The conversation twists and turns; Randi talks about her second article in a major journal, and laments trying to read when the baby is struggling to fall asleep: her solution? Reading TO her baby, who finds academic history journals deeply soporific. Continuing like this for an hour, an hour and a half, I scribble furiously in a notebook and make sure to ask each person "so what is in store for the next two weeks? What's next?" I

write it down, compulsively, just to keep a kind of record.

Clearly, this group I'm describing is a both problem-solving group and a small social gathering. We know each other, remember our projects and histories, and have developed a sort of history—the “remember whens” that characterize a group once it has gained an identity. This small group has a core membership of untenured professors and a changing stream of visitors, so the problems are always different, but will sound very familiar to us as teachers and writers: blocking, procrastination, re-learning how and when to revise, getting work into the hands of editors, finding time to write, revising dissertations for publication, and the like.

The Faculty Writing Group has contributed to a change, I believe, in at least three key terms. I said earlier that it was very difficult to sponsor a conversation about writing there; key terms are suspect and any disciplinary expertise from English is sometimes seen as invasive and unwelcome. The first is collaboration. At Cortland, it is possible to draw on the Faculty Writing Group as an example of how collaboration is a strategy that professional writers use to get their work done. The question becomes not just how can I teach writing or make writing useful for me, but how can *we* use writing? Faculty and students are very clear that writing is a kind of academic behavior that results in rewards if done well. But all of these writers are writers, facing many of the same difficulties and challenges. This is not new, but it is news, at least at Cortland. The Faculty Writing Group helps complete the circle by making collaboration visible as a behavior that an entire academic community engages in.

Development is a second contribution. Faculty are assumed to be experts in their field of study. This is tied in with a theory of language and writing at Cortland and elsewhere. Too often, writing is seen as the trappings, “tying it all up,” not much more than proofreading or correcting grammar. If meaning is merely “held” by the language one uses, then writing is packaging, not thinking. But the Faculty Writing Group helps make writing visible as a part of the process of making meaning in advanced academic literate activity. In other words, it makes it possible to think of writers becoming better writers, of failing, and of revising, and to think of these things as attempts to make meaning, to learn what's sayable and go more deeply into the connections between words and understanding. It is possible that in the future we will be able to

talk about the development as writers as an ongoing process, dependent on the subject, audience, purposes, genres and situations facing the writer. Writing, in other words, is construed by the Faculty Writing Group participants as developing one's expertise, not a threat to it. By extension, we are able to talk to faculty now across the curriculum about how writing happens in their discipline and for their students—rather than beginning the conversation about writing with the assumption that writing is a static skill owned by the grammarians in English who assume experts to be confident in.

Thus, and finally, it becomes possible to see disciplinary conventions as what they are: conventions that do the work for a discipline, often subtly, but powerfully. Conventions such as the IMRAC organization or the use of APA are functional and subject to change, asserted differently depending on the situation, and finally, teachable. Conventions—thought of as rules—need no longer be the main goal or origin of writing at Cortland. In conversations with faculty we are able to ask them what conventions they see in the professional and student work they read, and ask professors to name the conventions specifically rather than relying on the specious terms such as “clarity,” or “eloquence.”

Finally, I should say that we are always hoping that the Faculty Writing Group will remain in place, but it's not going to. There needs to be a second phase, a time of crisis, and some spin-offs. This may or may not happen. Jon was talking with me yesterday and noted how difficult it is to sustain such enterprises. We shall see. We will also have to wait to see how much and to what degree we are able to use the Faculty Writing Group as a basis for opening conversations about writing in other sites, in WAC meetings, classrooms, future surveys, as Margaret will discuss, and the like. Regardless, it seems to be clear that to understand writing one must understand and recognize the faculty as writers; otherwise, writing defaults to the competitive and secretive activity asserted by a tester on a testtaker.

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